

Potential Warning Signs of Homelessness

Note: While these are considered warning signs, please recognize that they only offer general guidance. There is significant variability within the school-age homeless population. Individual students may differ significantly from the following general characteristics.

Lack of Continuity in Education

- Attendance at many different schools
- Lack of personal records needed to enroll
- Inability to pay fees
- Gaps in skill development
- Mistaken diagnosis of abilities
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor ability to conceptualize

Poor Health/Nutrition

- Lack of immunizations and/or immunization records
- Unmet medical and dental needs
- Increased vulnerability to colds & flu
- Respiratory problems
- Skin rashes
- Chronic hunger (may hoard food)
- Fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

Transportation and Attendance Problems

- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Numerous absences
- Lack of participation in after-school activities
- Lack of participation in field trips
- Absences on days when student bring special treats from home
- Inability to contact parents

Poor Hygiene

- Lack of shower facilities/washers, etc.
- Wearing the same clothes for several days
- Inconsistent grooming – well-groomed one day and poorly groomed the next

Lack of Privacy/Personal Space After School

- Consistent lack of preparation for school
- Incomplete or missing homework (no place to work or keep supplies)
- Unable to complete special projects (no access to supplies)
- Lack of basic school supplies
- Loss of books and other supplies on a regular basis
- Concern for safety of belongings
- Refusing invitations from classmates

Social and Behavioral Concerns

- A marked change in behavior
- Poor/Short attention span
- Poor self esteem
- Extreme shyness
- Unwillingness to risk forming relationships with peers and teachers
- Difficulty socializing at recess
- Difficulty trusting people
- Aggression
- “Old” beyond years
- Protective of parents
- Clinging behavior
- Developmental delays
- Fear of abandonment
- School phobia (student wants to be with parent)
- Need for immediate gratification
- Anxiety late in the school day

Reaction/Statements by Parent, Guardian, or Child

- Exhibiting anger or embarrassment when asked about current address
- Mention of staying with grandparents, other relatives, friends, or in a motel or comments such as:
 - “I don’t remember the name of our previous school.”
 - “We’ve been moving around a lot.”
 - “Our address is new; I can’t remember it.” (may hide lack of permanent address)
 - We’re staying with relatives until we get settled.”
 - We’re going through a bad time right now.”
 - “We’ve been unpacking, traveling, etc.,” to explain poor appearance and/or hygiene.

(These warning signs were adapted from flyers developed by Illinois and Pennsylvania Departments of Education)

